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FOREIGN AFFAIRS | Flora Lewis

Not a National Disaster

WEST BERLIN

The near hysteria over espionage these days has produced a thriller atmosphere without the sober reasoning of the best spy thrillers. The preposterous Senate vote recommending that Secretary of State George Shultz cancel his trip to Moscow was an impulse of thoughtless indignation without concern for policy.

The highest officials have talked vaguely of great damage to U.S. interests as a result of the Marine guards' failure on duty. But nobody seems to be weighing the bigger questions of how much the loss of secrecy really matters.

After all, Mr. Shultz is arriving for the Moscow talks with considerable optimism because Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, appears ready to make a series of important concessions to meet concrete American and allied security needs. Of course, he's not making them to please but because just scooping up secrets doesn't meet his policy needs either.

There have long been good grounds for suspecting that a large part of what the C.I.A. and K.G.B. do serves primarily to keep each other in business. John Le Carré's novels are not so far from the truth. The agencies play a kind of game where winning is more important than the substance of informed decisions that the stolen secrets are supposed to make possible.

President Reagan said the Soviet spymasters went "beyond the bounds of reason," Secretary Shultz said they transgressed the "limits of unacceptable activities," and former C.I.A. director Stansfield Turner said they violated the "appropriate limit." These are ways of saying that of course everybody spies, but there are some unwritten rules of the game that the players expect to be observed. That doesn't sound very serious.

There are different kinds of spying and some make a real difference. One can be called hardware — when blueprints or actual equipment is delivered enabling copies to be made and countermeasures developed that could affect military capability. Another kind is operational, intelligence that could help track submarines on patrol, for example, or pinpoint targets. That's the kind of thing the Walker ring did to the U.S. Navy, and Jonathan Jay Pollard did for Israel, and it does cause grave damage.

Another has to do with counterintelligence, exposing agents. It can be tragic to the people involved, who may lose their lives, but it is a part of the reciprocal business.

Political intelligence is something else. That is presumably the main information the Russians expected to get by prowling around the existing U.S. Embassy in Moscow and massively bugging the new one being built.

Incidentally, rather than destroying the new building, Mr. Reagan should insist that the Russians buy it back, at cost, with no charge for whatever gimmicks they planted and can surreptitiously recover. The U.S. can afford to do without those unwelcome gifts and the Soviet state no doubt has some use for such well-wired offices and apartments. Then, the Russians would have to provide a new site for American construction.

Anyone who has lived in the East knows how irritating and tiresome it is to be under constant surveillance, robbed of all privacy. It's one of the hardships of the post. But it isn't a national disaster and it needn't affect foreign policy.

> How much does loss of secrecy matter?

Diplomats engaging in negotiations are instinctively appalled at the idea that the other side may know about their intentions beforehand. They assume secrecy is a tactical necessity. That isn't necessarily so.

It can be argued that both the Russians and Americans would have been better served if they knew more about each other's plans at the Reykjavik summit meeting so the responses could have been better prepared. And the Russians could hardly have learned about the instructions Mr. Shultz received for his Moscow mission before the key points appeared in the next day's American press.

Current and former intelligence officials and diplomats at a meeting of the American Council on Germany here had the routine distressed reaction to the Moscow spy affair until they were pressed to say what they thought had been affected by the spill. Probably not much of substance, most admitted. It is hard to conceive of any significant Soviet decision that might have been taken, or not taken, because of the secrets acquired.

This doesn't excuse the gross betrayal of duty by Americans in Government service. Spying is a dirty business and it's humiliating to learn the adversary has scored on you. But the deplorable affair shouldn't be blown into an issue of state. □